

Diplomacy Can Keep Us Safer than Force in the 21st Century

Statement by The Council for the National Interest, summarized in part from a June 23, 2008, speech by former Ambassador Chas Freeman, Middle East Policy Council.

Below are issues and realities that must be considered if positive changes in our standing in the world are to be made by the incoming Congress and Administration.

The U.S. currently faces a major crisis concerning our foreign policy and our role in the world. It is largely of our own making, arising from our failure over the past few years to practice the art of diplomacy, instead relying on a policy of militarism and arrogance toward the rest of the world. We have regrettably set aside the core American value that if possible, we should talk before we fight. This has gotten us into a state of endless war, inflamed much of the world against us, eroded our relations with our long time allies, and lost our hard-earned respect as a generous and moral leader. We are the most isolated we have been in our modern history.

Militarily, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have paradoxically shown the world the unmatched power of our military, but also the strategic limits of its use and our ineptness in managing its aftermath. Our military is now over-extended, worn out, and bogged down in two occupations, with little capacity to respond to crises elsewhere. These wars are not sustainable, they are draining our economy, and they have proven to be ineffective against terrorism.

Ideologically, the post 9/11 philosophy that keeping us safe from terrorism justifies any means has compromised our fundamental democratic ideals at home and corroded our ability to lead abroad. Internationally we are showing disdain for the United Nations and other world bodies, directly breaking international laws, and refusing to sign treaties the rest of the world considers of paramount importance.

Economically, there is a new world order rapidly rising around us. China and India have become major economic powers, while many other nations are also rapidly developing. Meanwhile we are squandering our resources on the destruction and botched rebuilding of vast areas of the Middle East instead of investing them in our own economy and rebuilding our own crumbling infrastructure. The industrial, financial, education, social, and cultural distribution of global power is shifting away from American influence.

Politically, other countries are coming to see the US as inept and incompetent. Whereas we once were seen as a leader working for peace by diplomatic means, we now are seen as an obstacle to work around. America's proclaimed Middle East "peace process" is now viewed as a cruel fraud by most in the region. Israel has resorted to Turkey to manage talks with Syria and relied on Egypt to mediate a cease-fire with Hamas. Saudi Arabia has worked with Iran toward aligning the Muslim mainstream against extremism, and to broker peace between Sunnis and Shiites. These and other political developments are all unfolding in our diplomatic absence. We are fostering our own irrelevance.

It is more important than ever that we turn again to working WITH other nations rather than trying to dictate TO them by returning to diplomacy as a remedy. This is not about being "soft" with our adversaries. It is the art of building partnerships and eliciting cooperation by persuading others that their interests coincide with ours. Like a business deal, it is a civilized negotiation for getting to a win-win situation. For five decades after

World War II, we used polite, civil diplomacy to achieve our ends, avoid nuclear war, and honorably lead the world. It is the customary American way, and it can work for us again.

It is especially critical that we develop trust and cooperation with Middle Eastern nations. First, we have yet to come up with a successful strategy to overcome the appeal of anti-American terrorism and reduce its recruits. The best qualified to do this are mainstream Muslims, acting in their own self-interest. Second, the oil supplies of the Middle East are crucial to US and world economic stability and prosperity. Our inept meddling with regime changes, manipulation of power within and among Middle Eastern countries, and destabilizing military actions have made them openly hostile or, at best, tolerant of us.

Clearly, it is time for a change. Militarism is a disastrous approach that is bankrupting us. Rebuilding our military and having it at the ready is essential, but premature use of military force leaves no room for American diplomacy. We need to replace fear and intolerance with a return to a civil, bi-partisan, approach to our interests by engaging all nations in a diplomatic dialogue.

Concretely, with regard to the Middle East, we need to launch a serious, fair, and sustained diplomatic effort, including all nations and major interest groups. Paramount objectives of this long-term initiative must be to defuse the Iranian standoff, facilitate a near term withdrawal from Iraq, develop a true collaborative effort against terrorism, and develop an even-handed solution to Israel-Palestine.

These are formidable challenges but there is no reason to doubt that we can meet them if we return to our past approach to leadership. In the first decade of this century we have been long on assertive patriotism but short on realism, vision, and statesmanship. These are qualities we have historically exemplified that enabled us to create a new world order of peace, progress, and prosperity after the Second World War. We have the talent and ability to define a better world order for the 21st Century as well, but only if we heed the lessons of our recent past and work cooperatively with the rest of the world.

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